

WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS ?

Inscribed to the Memory of
MAHATMA JOTIBA FULE (1827—1890)

The Greatest Shudra of Modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule.

WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS?

*How they came to be the
Fourth Varna in the
Indo-Aryan Society*

By B. R. Ambedkar

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PREFACE

In the present stage of the literature on the subject, a book on the Shudras cannot be regarded as a superfluity. Nor can it be said to deal with a trivial problem. The general proposition that the social organization of the Indo-Aryans was based on the theory of *Chaturvarnya* and that *Chaturvarnya* means division of society into four classes—*Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (soldiers), *Vaishyas* (traders) and *Shudras* (menials) does not convey any idea of the real nature of the problem of the Shudras nor of its magnitude. *Chaturvarnya* would have been a very innocent principle if it meant no more than mere division of society into four classes. Unfortunately, more than this is involved in the theory of *Chaturvarnya*. Besides dividing society into four orders, the theory goes further and makes the principle of graded inequality the basis for determining the terms of associated life as between the four *Varnas*. Again, the system of graded inequality is not merely notional. It is legal and penal. Under the system of *Chaturvarnya*, the *Shudra* is not only placed at the bottom of the gradation but he is subjected to innumerable ignominies and disabilities so as to prevent him from rising above the condition fixed for him by law. Indeed until the fifth *Varna* of the Untouchables came into being, the *Shudras* were in the eyes of the Hindus the lowest of the low. This shows the nature of what might be called the problem of the *Shudras*. If people have no idea of the magnitude of the problem it is because they have not cared to know what the population of the *Shudras* is. Unfortunately, the census does not show their population separately. But there is no doubt that excluding the Untouchables the *Shudras* form about 75 to 80 per cent of the population of Hindus. A treatise which deals with so vast a population cannot be considered to be dealing with a trivial problem.

The book deals with the *Shudras* in the Indo-Aryan Society. There is a view that an inquiry into these questions is of no present-day moment. It is said by no less a person than Mr. Sherring in his *Hindu Tribes and Castes** that :

"Whether the Shudras were Aryans, or aboriginal inhabitants of India, or tribes produced by the union of the one with the other, is of little practical moment. They were at an early period placed in a class by themselves, and received the fourth or last degree of rank, yet at a considerable distance from the three superior castes. Even though it be admitted that at the outset they were not Aryans, still, from their extensive intermarriages with the three

Aryan Castes, they have become so far Aryanized that, in some instances as already shown, they have gained more than they have lost, and certain tribes now designated as Shudras are in reality more Brahmins and Kshatriyas than anything else. In short, they have become as much absorbed in other races the Celtic tribes of England have become absorbed in the Anglo-Saxon race; and their own separate individuality, if they ever had any, has completely vanished."

This view is based on two errors. Firstly, the present-day Shudras are a collection of castes drawn from heterogeneous stocks and are racially different from the original Shudras of the Indo-Aryan society. Secondly, in the case of Shudras the centre of interest is not the Shudras as a people but the legal system of pains and penalties to which they are subjected. The system of pains and penalties was no doubt originally devised by the Brahmins to deal with the Shudras of the Indo-Aryan society, who have ceased to exist as a distinct, separate, identifiable community. But strange as it may seem the Code intended to deal with them has remained in operation and is now applied to all low-class Hindus, who have no lock stock with the original *Shudras*. How this happened must be a matter of curiosity to all. My explanation is that the Shudras of the Indo-Aryan Society in course of time became so degraded as a consequence of the severity of the Brahmanical laws that they really came to occupy a very low state in public life. Two consequences followed from this. One consequence was a change in the connotation of the word Shudra. The word Shudra lost its original meaning of being the name of a particular community and became a general name for a low-class people without civilisation, without culture, without respect and without position. The second consequence was that the widening of the meaning of the word Shudra brought in its train the widening of the application of the Code. It is in this way that the so-called *Shudras* of the present-day have become subject to the Code, though they are *not Shudras* in the original sense of the word. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the Code intended for the original culprits has come to be applied to the innocents. If the Hindu law-givers had enough historical sense to realise that the original *Shudras* were different from the present-day low-class people, this tragedy—this massacre of the innocents—would have been avoided. The fact, however unfortunate it may be, is that the Code is applied to the present-day *Shudras* in the same rigorous manner in which it was applied to the original *Shudras*. How such a Code came into being cannot therefore be regarded as of mere antiquarian interest to the *Shudras* of to-day.

While it may be admitted that a study of the origin of the *Shudras* is welcome, some may question my competence to handle the theme. I have

already been warned that while I may have a right to speak on Indian politics, religion and religious history of India are not my field and that I must not enter it. I do not know why my critics have thought it necessary to give me this warning. If it is an antidote to any extravagant claim made by me as a thinker or a writer, then it is unnecessary. For, I am ready to admit that I am not competent to speak even on Indian politics. If the warning is for the reason that I cannot claim mastery over the Sanskrit language, I admit this deficiency. But I do not see why it should disqualify me altogether from operating in this field. There is very little of literature in the Sanskrit language which is not available in English. The want of knowledge of Sanskrit need not therefore be a bar to my handling a theme such as the present. For I venture to say that a study of the relevant literature, albeit in English translations, for 15 years ought to be enough to invest even a person endowed with such moderate intelligence like myself, with sufficient degree of competence for the task. As to the exact measure of my competence to speak on the subject, this book will furnish the best testimony. It may well turn out that this attempt of mine is only an illustration of the proverbial fool rushing in where the angels fear to tread. But I take refuge in the belief that even the fool has a duty to perform, namely, to do his bit if the angel has gone to sleep or is unwilling to proclaim the truth. This is my justification for entering the prohibited field.

What is it that is noteworthy about this book? Undoubtedly the conclusions which I have reached as a result of my investigations. Two questions are raised in this book: (1) Who were the *Shudras*? and (2) How they came to be the fourth *Varna* of the Indo-Aryan society? My answers to them are summarised below :

- (1) The *Shudras* were one of the Aryan communities of the Solar race.
- (2) There was a time when the Aryan society recognised only three *Varnas*, namely. *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas*.
- (3) The *Shudras* did not form a separate *Varna*. They ranked as part of the *Kshatriya Varna* in the Indo-Aryan society.
- (4) There was a continuous feud between the *Shudra* kings and the *Brahmins* in which the *Brahmins* were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities.
- (5) As a result of the hatred towards the *Shudras* generated by their tyrannies and oppressions, the *Brahmins* refused to perform the *Upanayana* of the *Shudras*.
- (6) Owing to the denial of *Upanayana*, the *Shudras* who were *Kshatriyas* became socially degraded, fell below the rank of the *Vaishyas* and thus came to form the fourth *Varna*.

I must of course await the verdict of scholars on these conclusions. That

these conclusions are not merely original but they are violently opposed to those that are current is of course evident. Whether these conclusions will be accepted or not will depend upon the mentality of a person claiming to have a right to sit in judgement over the issue. Of course, if he is attached to a particular thesis he will reject mine. I would not however bother about his judgement for he would be an adversary from whom nothing can be expected except opposition. But if a person is an honest critic, howsoever cautious, however conservative he may be, provided that he has an open mind and a readiness to accept facts, I do not despair of converting him to my view. This expectation may fail to materialize, but about one thing I am quite certain. My critics will have to admit that the book is rich in fresh insights and new visions.

Apart from scholars, how the Hindu public will react may be an interesting speculation. The Hindus of to-day fall into five definite classes. There is a class of Hindus, who are known as orthodox and who will not admit that there is anything wrong with the Hindu social system. To talk of reforming it is to them rank blasphemy. There is a class of Hindus who are known as Arya Samajists. They believe in the *Vedas* and only in the *Vedas*. They differ from the orthodox inasmuch as they discard everything which is not in the *Vedas*. Their gospel is that of return to the *Vedas*. There is a class of Hindus who will admit that the Hindu social system is all wrong, but who hold that there is no necessity to attack it. Their argument is that since law does not recognize it, it is a dying, if not a dead system. There is a class of Hindus, who are politically minded. They are indifferent to such questions. To them *Swaraj* is more important than social reform. The fifth class of Hindus are those who are rationalists and who regard social reforms as of primary importance, even more important than *Swaraj*.

With the Hindus, who fall into the second category, those who are likely to regard the book as unnecessary, I cannot agree. In a way, they are right when they say that the existing laws in British India does not recognize the caste system prevalent in the Hindu society. It is true that, having regard to section II of the Civil Procedure Code, it would not be possible for a Hindu to obtain a declaration from a civil court that he belongs to a particular *Varna*. If courts in British India have to consider the question whether a person belongs to a particular *Varna*, it is only in cases of marriage, inheritance and adoption, the rules of which vary according to the *Varna* to which the party belongs. While it is true that the Law in British India does not recognize the four *Varnas* of the Hindus, one must be careful not to misunderstand what this means. To put it precisely: (1) it does not mean that the observance of the *Varna* system is a crime; (2) it does not mean that the *Varna* system has disappeared; (3) it does not mean that the *Varna* system is not given effect to in cases where the

observance of its rules are necessary to acquiring civil rights; (4) it only means that the general legal sanction behind the *Varna* system has been withdrawn. New, law is not the only sanction which goes to sustain social institutions. Institutions are sustained by other sanctions also. Of these, religious sanction and social sanction are the most important. The *Varna* system has a religious sanction. Because it has a religious sanction, the *Varna* system has the fullest social sanction from the Hindu society. With no legal prohibition, this religious sanction has been more than enough to keep the *Varna* system in full bloom. The best evidence to show that the *Varna* system is alive notwithstanding there is no law to enforce it, is to be found in the fact that the status of the *Shudras* and the Untouchables in the Hindu society has remained just what it has been. It cannot therefore be said that a study such as this is unnecessary.

As to the politically-minded Hindu, he need not be taken seriously. His line of approach is generally governed by a short-term view more than by long-range considerations. He is willing to follow the line of least resistance and postpone a matter, however urgent, if it is likely to make him unpopular. It is therefore quite natural if the politically-minded Hindu regards this book as a nuisance.

The book treads heavily on the toes of the Arya Samajists. My conclusions have come in sharp conflict with their ideology at two most important points. The Arya Samajists believe that the four *Varnas* of the Indo-Aryan society have been in existence from the very beginning. The book shows that there was a time when there were only three *Varnas* in the Indo-Aryan society. The Arya Samajists believe that the *Vedas* are eternal and sacrosanct. The book shows that portions of the *Vedas* at any rate, particularly the *Pursha Sukta*, which is the mainstay of the Arya Samajists, are fabrications by *Brahmins* intended to serve their own purposes. Both these conclusions are bound to act like atomic bombs on the dogmas of the Arya Samajists.

I am not sorry for this clash with Arya Samajists. The Arya Samajists have done great mischief in making the Hindu society a stationary society by preaching that the *Vedas* are eternal, without beginning, without end, and infallible, and that the social institutions of the Hindus being based on the *Vedas* are also eternal, without beginning, without end, infallible and therefore requiring no change. To be permeated with such a belief is the worst thing that can happen to a community. I am convinced that the Hindu society will not accept the necessity of reforming itself unless and until this Arya Samajists' ideology is completely destroyed. The book does render this service, if no other.

What the Orthodox Hindu will say about this book I can well imagine for I

have been battling with him all these years. The only thing I did not know was how the meek and non-violent looking Hindu can be violent when anybody attacks his Sacred Books. I became aware of it as never before when last year I received a shower of letters from angry Hindus, who became quite unbalanced by my speech on the subject delivered in Madras. The letters were full of filthy abuse, unmentionable and unprintable, and full of dire threats to my life. Last time they treated me as a first offender and let me off with mere threats. I don't know what they will do this time. For on reading the book they are sure to find more cause for anger at what in their eyes is a repetition of the offence in an aggravated form for having brought forth chapter and verse to show that what goes by the name of Sacred Books contains fabrications which are political in their motive, partisan in their composition and fraudulent in their purpose. I do not propose to take any notice of their vilifications or their threats. For I know very well that they are a base crew who, professing to defend their religion, have made religion a matter of trade. They are more selfish than any other set of beings in the world, and are prostituting their intelligence to support the vested interests of their class. It is a matter of no small surprise that when the mad dogs of orthodoxy are let loose against a person who has the courage to raise his voice against the so-called Sacred Books of the Hindus, eminent Hindus occupying lofty places, claiming themselves to be highly educated and who could be expected to have no interest and to have a free and open mind become partisans and join the outcry. Even Hindu Judges of High Courts and Hindu Prime Ministers of Indian States do not hesitate to join their kind. They go further. They not only lead the howl against him but even join in the hunt. What is outrageous is that they do so because they believe that their high stations in life would invest their words with an amount of terror which would be sufficient enough to cow down any and every opponent of orthodoxy. What I would like to tell these amiable gentlemen is that they will not be able to stop me by their imprecations. They do not seem to be aware of the profound and telling words of Dr. Johnson who when confronted with analogous situation said, 'I am not going to be deterred from catching a cheat by the menaces of a ruffian.' I do not wish to be rude to these high-placed critics, much less do I want to say that they are playing the part of a ruffian interested in the escape of a cheat. But I do want to tell them two things: firstly that I propose, no matter what happens, to follow the determination of Dr. Johnson in the pursuit of historical truth by the exposure of the Sacred Books so that the Hindus may know that it is the doctrines contained in their Sacred Books which are responsible for the decline and fall of their country and their society; secondly, if the Hindus of this generation do not take notice of what I have to say I am

sure the future generation will. I do not despair of success. For I take consolation in the words of the poet Bhavabhuti who said, "Time is infinite and earth is vast, some day there will be born a man who will appreciate what I have said." Whatever that be the book is a challenge to orthodoxy.

The only class of Hindus, who are likely to welcome the book are those who believe in the necessity and urgency of social reform. The fact that it is a problem which will certainly take a long time to solve and will call the efforts of many generations to come, is in their opinion, no justification for postponing the study of that problem. Even an ardent Hindu politician, if he is honest, will admit that the problems arising out of the malignant form of communalism, which is inherent in the Hindu social organization and which the politically minded Hindus desire to ignore or postpone, invariably return to plague, those very politicians at every turn. These problems are not the difficulties of the moment. They are our permanent difficulties, that is to say, difficulties of every moment. I am glad to know that such a class of Hindus exists. Small though they be, they are my mainstay and it is to them that I have addressed my argument.

It will be said that I have shown no respect for the sacred literature of the Hindus which every sacred literature deserves. If the charge be true, I can plead two circumstances in justification of myself. Firstly I claim that in my research I have been guided by the best tradition of the historian who treats all literature as vulgar—I am using the word in its original sense of belonging to the people—to be examined and tested by accepted rules of evidence without recognizing any distinction between the sacred and the profane and with the sole object of finding the truth. If in following this tradition I am found wanting in respect and reverence for the sacred literature of the Hindus my duty as a scholar must serve as my excuse. Secondly, respect and reverence for the sacred literature cannot be made to order. They are the results of social factors which make such sentiments natural in one case and quite unnatural in another. Respect and reverence for the sacred literature of the Hindus is natural to a Brahmin scholar. But it is quite unnatural in a non-Brahmin scholar. The explanation of this difference is quite simple. That a Brahmin scholar should treat this sacred literature with uncritical reverence and forbear laying on it the heavy hands which the detachment of an intellectual as distinguished from the merely educated is what is to be expected. For what is this sacred literature? It is a literature which is almost entirely the creation of the Brahmins. Secondly, its whole object is to sustain the superiority and privileges of the Brahmins as against the non-Brahmins. Why should not the Brahmins uphold the sanctity of such a literature? The very reason that leads the Brahmin to uphold it makes the non-Brahmin hate

it. Knowing that what is called the sacred literature contains an abominable social philosophy which is responsible for their social degradation, the non-Brahmin reacts to it in a manner quite opposite to that of the Brahmin. That I should be wanting in respect and reverence for the sacred literature of the Hindus should not surprise any one if it is borne in mind that I am a non-Brahmin, not even a non-Brahmin but an Untouchable. My antipathy to the sacred literature could not naturally be less than that of the non-Brahmin As Prof. Thorndyke says: that a man thinks is a biological fact what he thinks is a sociological fact.

I am aware that this difference in the attitude of a Brahmin scholar and a non-Brahmin scholar towards this sacred literature—literature which is the main source of the material for the study of the problems of the social history of the Hindus—the former with his attitude of uncritical commendation and the latter with his attitude of unsparing condemnation is most harmful to historical research.

The mischief done by the Brahmin scholars to historical research is obvious. The *Brahmin* scholar has a two-fold interest in the maintenance of the sanctity of this literature. In the first place being the production of his forefathers his filial duty leads him to defend it even at the cost of truth. In the second place as it supports the privileges of the *Brahmins*, he is careful not to do anything which would undermine its authority. The necessity of upholding the system by which he knows he stands to profit, as well as of upholding the prestige of his forefathers as the founders of the system, acts as a silent immaculate premise which is ever present in the mind of the *Brahmin* scholar and prevents him from reaching or preaching the truth. That is why one finds so little that is original in the field of historical research by *Brahmin* scholars unless it be a matter of fixing dates or tracing genealogies. The non-Brahmin scholar has none of these limitations and is therefore free to engage himself in a relentless pursuit of truth. That such a difference exists between the two classes of students is not a mere matter of speculation. This very book is an illustration in point. It contains an exposure of the real character of the conspiracy against the *Shudras*, which no *Brahmin* scholar could have had the courage to present.

While it is true that a non-Brahmin scholar is free from the inhibitions of the Brahmin scholar he is likely to go to the other extreme and treat the whole literature as a collection of fables and fictions fit to be thrown on the dung heap not worthy of serious study. This is not the spirit of an historian. As has been well said, an historian ought to be exact, sincere, and impartial; free from passion, unbiased by interest, fear, resentment or affection; and faithful to the truth, which is the mother of history, the preserver of great actions, the

enemy of oblivion, the witness of the past. the director of the future. In short he must have an open mind, though it may not be an empty mind, and readiness to examine all evidence even though it be spurious. The non-Brahmin scholar may find it difficult to remain true to this spirit of the historian. He is likely to import the spirit of non-Brahmin politics in the examination of the truth or falsity of the ancient literature which is not justifiable. I feel certain that in my research I have kept myself free from such prejudice. In writing about the *Shudras* I have had present in my mind no other consideration except that of pure history. It is well-known that there is a non-Brahmin movement in this country which is a political movement of the Shudras. It is also well-known that I have been connected with it. But I am sure that the reader will find that I have not made this book a preface to non-Brahmin politics.

I am sensible of the many faults in the presentation of the matter. The book is loaded with quotations, too long and too many. The book is not a work of art and it is possible that readers will find it tedious to go through it. But this fault is not altogether mine. Left to myself, I would have very willingly applied the pruning knife. But the book is written for the ignorant and the uninformed *Shudras*, who do not know how they came to be what they are. They do not care how artistically the theme is handled. All they desire is a full harvest of material—the bigger the better. Those of them to whom I have shown the manuscript have insisted upon retaining the quotations. Indeed, their avidity for such material was so great that some of them went to the length of insisting that besides giving translations in English in the body of the book I should also add the original Sanskrit texts in an Appendix. While I had to deny their request for the reproduction of the original Sanskrit texts, I could not deny their request for retaining the translations on the ground that the material is not readily available to them. When one remembers that it is the *Shudras*, who have largely been instrumental in sustaining the infamous system of *Chaturvarnya*, though it has been the primary cause of their degradation and that only the *Shudras* can destroy the *Chaturvarnya*, it would be easy to realize why I allowed the necessity of educating and thereby preparing the *Shudra* fully for such a sacred task to outweigh all other considerations which favoured the deletion or if not deletion the abridgement of the quotations.

There are three persons to whom I owe my thanks. Firstly to the writer of Adhyaya LX of the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata. Whether it is *Vyasa*, *Vaiashampayana*, *Suta*, *Lomaharshana* or *Bhrigu* it is difficult to say. But whoever he was, he has rendered great service by giving a full description of *Paijavana*. If he had not described *Paijavana* as a *Shudra*, the clue to the

origin of the *Shudra* would have been completely lost. I express my gratitude to the writer for having preserved so important a piece of information for posterity. Without it, this book could not have been written. Secondly, I must thank Prof. Kangle of Ismail Yusuf College, Andheri, Bombay. He has come to my rescue and has checked the translation of Sanskrit shlokas which occur in the book. As I am not a Sanskrit scholar, his help has been to me a sort of an assurance that I have not bungled badly in dealing with the material which is in Sanskrit. The fact that he has helped me does not mean that he is responsible for such faults and errors as may be discovered by my critics. Thanks are also due to Prof. Manohar Chitnis of the Siddharth College, Bombay, who has been good enough to prepare the Index.

I am grateful to Messrs. Charles Scribner's Sons Publishers, New York for their kind permission to reproduce the three maps from Mr. Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* and which form Appendices II, III and IV of this book.

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10th October 1946
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[Part I](#)